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ABSTRACT

In a pilot study based on a project underwritten by the United States Department of Education to add more study of international issues to writing courses, revisions in content to both a first year and an advanced composition course were tested during 1993-94. The method for the classroom procedures was also changed to enhance the greater responsibility of the students as researchers, writers, and editors. Using a sequence of expanding writing assignments and varying types of workshops, the writing course curriculum facilitates students' individual and group proficiencies in focus, description, audience awareness, and self awareness. A writing instructor at Davis & Elkins College, West Virginia, redesigned first year and advanced composition courses to have this new content imperative. The assignments ran through a variety of open-sided (as opposed to open-ended) topics. The second term first-year course focused on environmental topics. Students wrote about such topics as the indigenous people of Central America, infanticide, contemporary Fascism, the former Soviet Republics, and Appalachia. The introduction of a tangible audience into the classroom is a vital element for the teacher and student. (An appendix contains five assignment sheets from the first-year first term course in the project.) (RS)

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A Classroom Program in Discovery of Self, Community, and Writing

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In a pilot study based on a project underwritten by the U.S. Department of Education to add more study of international issues to Writing courses, revisions in content to both a First Year and an Advanced Composition courses were tested during 1993-1994. In doing so, the method for the classroom procedures was also changed to enhance the greater responsibility of the students as researchers, writers, and editors.

Within a historical context of debates on the teaching of writing, we explored ways to create a further communication dynamic for our writing students. This unique opportunity to experiment with issues of community both inside the class and out into the world came during a long term study funded by DOE. The project, entitled "Internationalizing English Composition Courses," began with a two week seminar at West Virginia University bringing together political scientists from across the country and a dozen writing instructors from colleges and universities throughout West Virginia. This meant that the team of instructors had experience with an extremely wide range of students, from large to small - urban to quite rural schools, and would eventually test our new curriculums with these varied populations. To better prepare us to teach these new lessons, the four visiting political scientists provided small seminars, which lasted two to three days, on different global issues, such as Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Block, the Pacific Rim, and the Third World. In addition, there were facilitators on call through out the two weeks from WVU, on politics, and the eminent Bill Biddle of the English Department, University of Vermont.

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Among the many points of our investigation as writing instructors were ways to increase our students' knowledge of and involvement with global issues and how to make a study of our shared political world the catalyst to create a more active writing community. In doing so, the method for the classroom procedures was also changed to enhance the greater responsibility of the students as researchers, writers, and editors.

Using a sequence of expanding writing assignments and varying types of workshops, this writing course curriculum facilitates students' individual and group proficiencies in focus, description, audience awareness and self awareness. Before they are discussed, though, let me take some time to set a historical debate, not on politics, but the teaching of Rhetorical strategies.

Debates as to the critical element in the Writing Process have usually taken sides as to either the preeminence of the Writer or the essential nature of the Text. Throughout these studies into the instruction of three writing genres, the key element in every teaching situation is, instead of either Writer or Text, the creation of a tangible Audience for the student writer.

In 1960, Roman Jakobson wanted to construct a model through which to explain the fundamental factors of verbal communication. Our interest here in written communication will be served very well by starting with this verbal model. This is consistently true on a general level for such a discussion and in specific ways later in the essay. In developing his diagram, he created an elaboration of the Communications Triangle in which the Addresser is on one side of a tower of terms from the Addressee. The Tower is a stack made up of, from top to bottom, Context, Message, Contact, and Code. When the model is laid over on a argumentative text, the discourse is a cognitive action by the addressee. Here, the focus is on the reader.

To James Kinneavy, in 1971, this writing action is not a function of thought, but an aim by the writer to persuade. The four terms of the tower are used as unique, but related, fields through which the communication takes places. The Reader, the Addresser, is sometimes left by scholars as a neglected appendage, an inconvenient necessity while we study how to reach the students who are trying to become better writers.

By 1981, Linda Flowers and John Hayes created their own model of the cognitive guidance within the composition of a text. It moved from the Writer's memory through the acts of inventing, drafting, and revising the writing on to its context, or Task Environment. Instead of a person or people as the Audience at the end of the stream of thought, Flower and Hayes gave us audience as one part of the Rhetorical Problem and as one of two parts of the Environment.

Later, Flowers produced a new model in which the Text rests between the Writer and the Reader and their separate, but parallel, mental representations. In the new map of the process, nothing but a mental line connects the Writer or the Reader and its side of the Text. Still, a quality called Awareness sits nearly parallel to the front edge of either living participant. Behind each of the two people/groups are equal arcs of context, language, aims, and so on. In Flower's model, the aesthetic dynamic of the writing process is more completely displayed than earlier schemes. It is when a balance of all the parties in every communication transaction, and their constituent parts, exist that we have the effective transmission of facts, ideas, concepts, beliefs, emotions, and even dreams.

My part was to be one of the seminar participants then re-design the curriculum of my First-Year and Advanced Composition courses at Davis & Elkins College to have this new content imperative. While it is never fair to categorize any school's population, the one at D&E did have a diverse mix of

traditional and non-traditional students who were both native West Virginians, many the first in their family to attend college, and people from across the United States and a few other countries, which some coming from affluent backgrounds.

Since the team met in late Summer 1993, I put my new plans into play almost immediately after the two week seminar with the new Fall term. During the next few months, though two semesters, we all kept notes, sent in reports to the coordinator at WVU, and had an end of academic year meeting for the team in Morgantown. While the reports from the dozen writing instructor practitioners have been synthesized into a project report, I would like to bring up some specific examples from my own classes.

In the First-Year courses, there was, as had to be expected, a resistance to what some students perceived as having to learn two things, the writing and the information, in just one course. The courses were very main stream classes in, first term, expository writing and, second term, in persuasive writing and basic research. It had not always occurred to these new students that they had to have something to write about, and an audience who would care about what was written, to have real communications - even in classroom. With that not unfamiliar context for a required writing class, the new curriculum had its own very good audience.

The assignments ran through a variety of opened-sided (as opposed to open-ended) topics. For example, the students were free to write about some issue they knew was or had recently had been part of a local election in their home community. Before then, though, we worked on establishing just what their community is by making that the first informative essay assignment. For some people, it was easy to define their home because of borders - such as a school district or where the buildings stopped along the road. Others quickly

realized that 'community' could be an arbitrary and individual creation of each person.

To make our class discussions more energetic than a simple lecture, I sometimes developed less than conventional lesson plans out of the necessity of making the subject material more inviting to students who often asked why they had to learn both Writing and Facts all at the same time. One of these in-class experiments was Gameshow - an exercise of guessing a real community by listing no more than five major qualities. For example, one team would start listing things like historical sites or national food or arts until the other team could guess the country or culture in five or fewer clues. From this, we moved into doing comparisons of what made two communities unique and still similar. It was actually quite easy to place many of the Aristotelian modes of writing into the assignments. (The five assignments sheets are attached as an Appendix.)

The second term First-Year composition course had a focus on environmental topics. This was chosen, partially, because there was a previously scheduled set of lecturers on the environment visiting the campus that term. We tried to take advantage of these living resources. Additionally, as part of the project's experiments, I thought we had to try variations of the curriculum structure. By creating a consistent thematic core to the information in this term, it was hoped the students would be able to build their expertise on the subject as they advanced through more argumentative tropes. As specific examples, they wrote to the EPA about a toxic waste dump that was planned for the area which was also to bring in needed jobs. With the environmental and economic pressures in West Virginia, this assignment hit home for many students. As a research topic, they investigated the Rio Treaty and addressed an evaluation of its effectiveness to the United Nations General Assembly.

As with any of these classroom situations, the students were not successful to themselves, their peers, or their evaluators, until the Author and Audience Circuit/Community was complete. They had a real world audience and their peers to be its local manifestation. Classes were, for instance, broken into teams to role play the two sides. In this way, as they prepared to be the General Assembly's shadow, they better learned who their paper's audience really was.

The members of this Advanced class, at the sophomore/junior level, quickly established a community of inter-reliance. This course was markedly different from the previous ones in a few ways. One, the students had already had the two first-year courses as prerequisites - and some had had other upper-division writing courses. Two, the concept behind this curriculum was to challenge these advanced writers to take on greater responsibility as writer, editor, and researcher. The topics were more opened ended than for the first-year students, with each student needing to prepare a short proposal for me before each major paper. They also gave and received input from each other on the proposed topics, information resources, and editing by role playing the intended audiences. More than role playing audiences, though, they became a team of resource and rhetorical specialists for each other.

Through all this, each student grew in her knowledge and understanding of global environmental, political, economic, and social issues. They wrote about such subjects as the indigenous people of Central America, Infanticide, contemporary Fascism, the former Soviet Republics, and Appalachia. Opening the discussion to Appalachia gave both native West Virginians and students who had moved there for college to better understand and articulate their own mountain lined world. As specific assignments, they were to write to the World Health Organization over Global Population Growth and, as a major

assignment, had to propose a specific topic, one of a major conflict between parties in the world, and discuss what America's responsibilities to the parties, to the world community, and to itself were.

In each example in this project, the introduction of a tangible audience into the classroom is the vital element for the teacher and student. A new map, one with an image of the Audience imposed between the Writer and the Text, but with Writer's Text not obscured by the Audience but more clearly defined, has been demonstrated. This Pedagogical map shows the role of the Instructor, or Mediator of the terms between Writer and Audience, is to create this reflected, but valid image of the Reader, the participant otherwise missing from the classroom.

The cognitive model of discovery developed by the classes' experiences has clear parallels to Flower and Hayes' Model of the Rhetorical Problem. While the practicalities of each "Rhetorical Situation" were worked out in our group discussions, the "Writer's Own Goals" as to the implied effect on the Reader, the nature of the Writer's persona, and the organization of the essay grew through constant invention and revision modules.

Results of our work are being reviewed through a series of college and DOE class surveys, their extensive Journals, and a review of samples by project team members from other institutions. We hope this is the beginning of a long term exploration of how to bring the real world and the rhetorical community together in the classroom, where, in reality, they always have been.

NOTE: What is described in the last paragraph was intended in late 1994 into 1995, but I am not aware of any specific or exhaustive articles published on the project. Since I have moved on to a new school in a new state, though, there hopefully are many such records from my team-mates and/or Bill. It was an honor to work with you.

Revised 8/1998

Appendix: The Five Assignment Sheets from the First-Year First Term Course
in the Project.

Note: the term Quotebook comes from an idea given to us by Bill Biddle during the seminar. With this, at least some of the Journals were the student writer's reactions to what other people had said or written, documenting the author and source in heading before the entry itself.

First Assignment Sheet:

Your assignment is to write an essay, of at least two to three typed pages in length, on an occasion when you first visited, or "discovered" a place. Describe the place, its population (if any), and your reaction to learning about this new location.

Write this as the story of the discovery. There should a "plot" to your narrative. For example, what reason brought you to this place? Was it planned or a surprise? What are the key events of this time of discovery for you? Are there people who are important to the telling of your story? If so, explain who they are to a Reader who has not met them yet. Has the event of this discovery, as explained in your narrative, had a continuing effect on you? How and why?

Please note a vital hint in the previous paragraph. You are writing this for other people who, just as you once were, has not yet discovered this place and does not yet know how you see it. Do not just tell about it; show it.

Journal Suggestions: What are places around the world you still want to discover for yourself? Why? You might do a little reading about some of those places and find the material for Quotebook entries while you are at it.

Second Assignment Sheet:

Define a real person you know. This must be someone you have/have had direct contact with not someone you only know through the media or from a great distance. Who are they? What makes them special to you?

This is to be a Portrait in words. It should be more than the data that would go into a biography; age, appearance, education, position, etc.. This essay is to be a description of whom this person is in your eyes.

To create this portrait, you may want to try a few methods of research. If possible, you might want to interview this person. Fill in the blanks in your knowledge of the person. Additionally, you could interview other people who also know this individual. This would provide you with other views of the person's character and/or fill in details if your subject is unavailable for an interview.

Journal Advice: read about famous or even fictional people you are interested in to find Quotebook entries or examples of how to write this kind of descriptive/defining portrait. Besides the usual

magazines and newspapers, see what biographical books you might find.

Third Assignment Sheet:

What "Community" do you live in? Define how it is a Community. The place which we call home may be very small or gigantic and the qualities that differentiate it from other locations can be of all sorts. What exactly is your community? Think to yourself: "Which place in the world is mine? By which do I identify myself?" Is it a neighborhood, town, city, county, state, region, or, even, a campus, or something else? Show it and explain it.

What does it look like and what makes it unique? Another way to look at the word "unique" in the last sentence is what makes it your home community: nothing more, nothing less, nothing else. Is it geographical, legal, emotional, or other? Does it deal with the people's customs, history, forms of entertainment, and/or the schools attended? What creates its identity?

A hint: It might help to think about how much alike this paper and Assignment #2 are. They are very similar. The main difference is that #2 is about a person and #3 is about a place.

Journal Advice: read about what it takes for a place be recognized as a nation, a state, a city, and so forth. Who decrees that someplace is formally a community? Why is it so important? As an example of the importance of those concepts, there are many wars and other

conflicts which arise because people can not agree on what defines a community and who should be allowed to live or work there.

Fourth Assignment Sheet

This will be the first of your longer essay assignments. It should be considered that way because, to fulfill its basic requirements, it demands the most complicated internal structure of anything you have had to do. Remember that it will not necessarily result the longest paper that you have so far written .

You will be defining two concepts. Each will be done through the use of its own specific example. You will also be explaining how these concepts are similar and/or different. They may have similarities along with some differences. That is the essence of a comparison/contrast essay.

For this essay, you will compare and contrast your own ideals of who is hero and who is a villain. To do so, you will choose one person to represent your idea of a hero and another who is a villain.

Remember, these are to be your definitions of these concepts, not what other people have said. The examples are to be real people, but they may be people you do not know personally.

Journal Suggestion: Check into heroes that have come to us from different cultures and times. See how they compare and contrast to your definitions.

Fifth and Final Assignment Sheet:

While many of us would not call ourselves a "writer" because of the images of a professional writer and/or an artist that the word can conjure up, we all really are WRITERS. As a college student, your different roles as a Writer may be more defined and more important for you than ever before in your life. Based on any source of information and evidence you can legitimately (this means that nothing is made-up) use, analyze yourself.

See what kind of a Writer you are.

What things do you write?

How do you go about writing?

Which things do you enjoy writing?

What are your biggest fears?

Which kinds of things do you wish, even dream, you could write?

What are you good at?

What needs more work?

Why? How?

These are just a sample of the questions you may want to ask yourself.

For your evidence, use all of your D & E essays, even if they are not from this class, your Journal, your class notes, your letters to family and friends, the things you've written for enjoyment, and anything else you have done. Just make sure your Reader knows what these texts are, for example by a name and/or date, and what your examples are to show about you.